THE LEGEND OF WHITE HORSE PLAIN

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL
AFFAIRS AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES

Historic Resources Branch

Honourable Eugene Kostyra
Minister

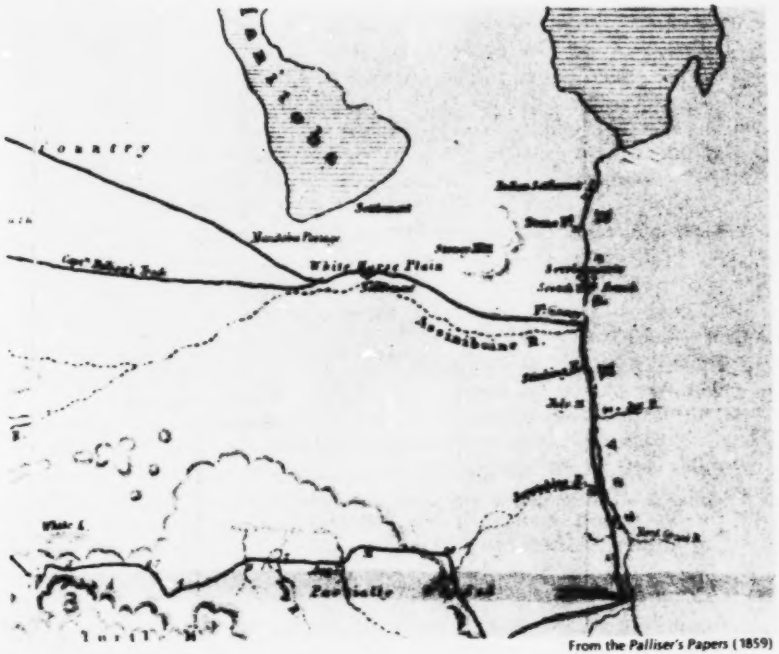
1983

THE LEGEND OF WHITE HORSE PLAIN

The story of the White Horse Plain is one of Manitoba's most familiar and romantic Indian legends. For many generations the story was passed on by word of mouth and the earliest printed versions were based on this oral tradition. Although the written accounts of the legend sometimes differ in detail, they do not seriously contradict one another. It is therefore probable that the story has remained essentially the same since it was first told in the seventeenth century.

The legend is associated with an area of land west of Winnipeg known as the White Horse Plain. The boundaries of the plain are difficult to establish, but it is generally agreed that the ridge known as "Coteau des Festins" marks the northern and western limit.* The Assiniboine River is usually identified as the southern boundary, although some maintain that the plain actually extended south of the river. The eastern limit apparently runs somewhere between St. François-Xavier and Headingley.

* This ridge derived its name from the dog feasts that were held on the site by the Indians.



From the Palliser's Papers (1859)

A section of Captain John Palliser's map of the "Country between the Red River Settlement and the Rocky Mountains" 1859, showing the location of White Horse Plain

The most common version of the legend explains how the bonds of friendship between the Assiniboine and Sioux Indians were broken. According to this account the Assiniboine were members of the Sioux nation; they spoke the same language and had frequent exchanges with their brothers to the south. But the Assiniboine lived close to the Cree Indians (Kristinos), who were traditional foes of the Sioux. The Cree had been given firearms and powder by the traders of the Hudson's Bay Company, and so the Assiniboine sought a peace treaty with their armed neighbours. The rest of the Sioux nation had no share in this agreement and they began to suspect their Assiniboine brothers of treachery. The event that led to the final break between the Sioux and Assiniboine is described as follows.

One day a young Cree brave entered an Assiniboine camp and asked if he might marry the chief's daughter. As the maiden was a rare and delicate beauty the chief claimed a great price for her hand. Fortunately, the Cree warrior had a peerless and tempting prize to offer — a beautiful and spirited snow-white steed. A horse of such fine breeding and character was of immeasurable value to the buffalo hunting Assiniboine, and the Chief was unable to resist the offer. He happily gave his daughter in exchange for the Cree's powerful horse.

Other members of the Assiniboine tribe still harboured a fierce hatred of the Cree, a tribe that had killed and scalped many of their relatives. Rumours spread and a few began to plot against the marriage that would further estrange the Assiniboine from their blood relations, the Sioux. The medicine man, who had long held a grudge against the bride's father, notified the Sioux of the proposed marriage, and a few days later a large band of warriors arrived at the Assiniboine camp.

One of the Sioux braves had also asked for the hand of the Chief's daughter but had been rejected. When he learned that a Cree warrior had been accepted over him, he flew into a rage and vowed to capture and torture his rival under the pretext that such action would constitute a reprisal for past wars. Aware of the danger that threatened his son-in-law, the Assiniboine chief saddled the white horse and advised the couple to escape under the cover of night.

The warrior and his bride mounted the steed and fled, but the Sioux discovered their disappearance at daybreak and followed in hot pursuit. They overtook the couple on the west banks of the Assiniboine River, a few miles west of the spot where the parish church of St. François-Xavier now stands. The Sioux arrows found their mark and the Cree warrior and his bride were both shot and killed. The white horse, freed of its double burden, dashed off across the plain at a wild gallop. The Sioux tried to capture the horse but were unable to keep up with his tremendous speed.

According to the legend the white horse continued to roam the neighbouring plain for many years. The Indians did not dare risk his capture because of his association with the dead couple. No one knew what became of the horse, but an Assiniboine medicine man assured his people that the Manitous (Spirits) had carried the horse to the spirit world where he was reunited with the Cree brave.

A sketch of the white horse by Jeff Gauley, based on Henry Fuseli's painting, "The Nightmare"

Thus the hostile division between the Assiniboine and the Sioux was complete. The Indians named the plain where the white horse ran free in honour of this powerful animal. Henceforth, the land which eventually included the parish of St. François-Xavier came to be known as the White Horse Plain.

Most accounts of the legend differ only in detail. One source identifies the white horse as a Blanco Diablo, one of the famous breed from Mexico. Some versions relate the actual conversations between the parties involved. Another account, based on oral tradition, claims that the white horse was killed many years later by the Minnesota Sioux who arrived in Manitoba in 1863 in desperate search of food.

There is only one version that differs substantially from the first.

According to this account, the Cree warrior rode into the Assiniboine camp on a grey horse, leading the white one laden with gifts for the bride's father. At the time of their escape, the bride rode off on the white horse, while the groom followed on the grey. Even though they doubled back on their tracks to confuse their pursuers, the white horse could not be camouflaged on the open prairie. As a result, the Sioux were able to keep sight of the couple's course.

Because she rode the superior mount the Assiniboine maiden could have eluded the Sioux, but legend has it that she refused to abandon her husband and chose instead to die with him. Once they had killed the couple, the Sioux captured the grey horse. Owing to its great strength and speed, the white horse won its race for freedom. Many Indians believed that the soul of the girl passed into the white steed, and so few people were brave enough to try and approach the animal.

The Legend as a Source of Information

Oral tradition was an important part of Indian culture. Prior to the arrival of the Europeans, the Indians had no alphabet and so the tribe's history, religion and morality were orally transmitted or recorded pictorially through symbols. In this manner the wisdom and knowledge of the tribe was passed on from one generation to the next.

Unfortunately, very little has been written about interpreting and understanding folklore as a source of historical information. There are different opinions about the value of legends in interpreting the past. Some experts believe that folklore can only be utilized to corroborate or to lend "colour" to factual information gathered from other sources. Due to the recent revival in the use of oral history, however, many professionals now maintain that oral traditions — the stories, myths and legends of a people — can provide the modern researcher with valuable information on the lifestyles and culture of a particular group. The legend of the White Horse Plain provides an excellent example.

Information on Native customs and attitudes can be gleaned from the story. For example, as the legend illustrates, it was customary for a prospective groom to offer the bride's parents a gift prior to marriage. If the present was accepted, the bride was offered in wedlock and a valid union was stuck. Moreover, the legend illustrates the importance of horses to the plains tribes. By emphasizing the exceptional quality and mystical power of the white horse the story demonstrates both the spiritual and practical value of an animal that could be used for hunting and transportation. Finally, the legend also helps to explain the divisions and alliances of the three tribes who participated in the events described.

The Assiniboine Indians are in fact related to the Yankton Sioux, but they separated from the main group some time in the seventeenth century, prior to contact with European traders and explorers. The Assiniboine moved further north and west while the main group of Sioux remained in the south, in what is now the United States. Various accounts which attempt to date the split differ, and the reasons for the separation remain unclear.

In David Thompson's journal of 1797, "Journey to the Mandane Villages," the explorer relates the story of a feud that broke out between the Assiniboine and Sioux sometime between 1747 and 1757. Thompson suggests that this resulted in a hostile separation whereby the Assiniboine established themselves farther to the northwest than the main body of the Sioux. Earlier journals kept by explorers and traders contradict Thompson's account. One of these, compiled from information given by Indians in 1702, states that the arrival of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670, and the subsequent arming of the Cree, led to the Assiniboine-Cree alliance. This pact with a traditional enemy caused a serious rift between the Sioux and Assiniboine. Nevertheless, neither of the two explanations takes into account the fact that the Assiniboine were a distinct group as early as 1640, some thirty years prior to the arrival of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Historian Arthur J. Ray provides another possible explanation. He maintains that after the initial split and before 1670, the Assiniboine probably lived in peace with the Siouian bands to the south but were different enough to be considered a separate group by the Cree. Ray speculates that over the years the Assiniboine may have developed friendly relations with the Cree through trade contacts. Once the fur trade pushed into the interior and the Cree were armed by the Hudson's Bay Company, Ray suggests that the Assiniboine recognized the advantages of a formal alliance with their armed neighbours. This formal alliance with an hereditary enemy would have led to a final hostile split between the Sioux and Assiniboine.

Ray's theory may explain why the Assiniboine-Sioux hostilities are often dated to the Hudson's Bay Company's intrusion into land south of Hudson Bay, even though the tribe was an identifiable group prior to this date. It is certainly true that the legend of the White Horse Plain can be incorporated into Ray's line of reasoning. Moreover, the legend does correspond to the Indian account given in 1702.

Settlement on the White Horse Plain

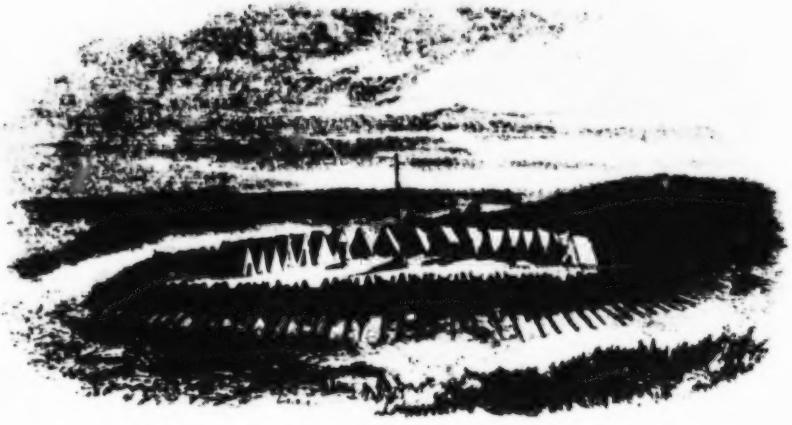
The area of the White Horse Plain was first settled in 1824 by fifty Métis families under the leadership of Cuthbert Grant. At that time HBC Governor George Simpson wanted to attract displaced families from Pembina to a settlement nearer to the forks of the Red and Assiniboine. Because of his influence among the Métis and his leadership qualities, Grant was given a tract of land on the White Horse Plain on the understanding that a settlement would be established there.

The settlement known as "Grantown" developed as a river front village patterned on the seigneuries of Quebec. Although the Métis farmed the land, their main occupation was buffalo hunting. They became the chief suppliers of pemmican, the food that fueled the brigades of the fur trade and supplemented the diet of the colonists at Red River. As the settlement grew, the mission of St. François-Xavier was established by the Roman Catholic clergy, and the village eventually came to

be known by its parish name. The surrounding community on the White Horse Plain remains predominantly agricultural.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Cuthbert Grant



Courtesy Glenbow Museum

Métis camp at night with Red River carts in a circle, from an engraving by Charles de Volpi, Montreal, 1858

The anecdotal nature of Indian legends makes them attractive children's stories, but their potential value far exceeds the realm of children's literature. The legend of the White Horse Plain, recounted continuously since the seventeenth century, demonstrates that oral history has much to offer. It provides important information on the lifestyle and customs of an earlier time and presents important historical facts in an interesting and entertaining manner.

Suggestions for Further Reading

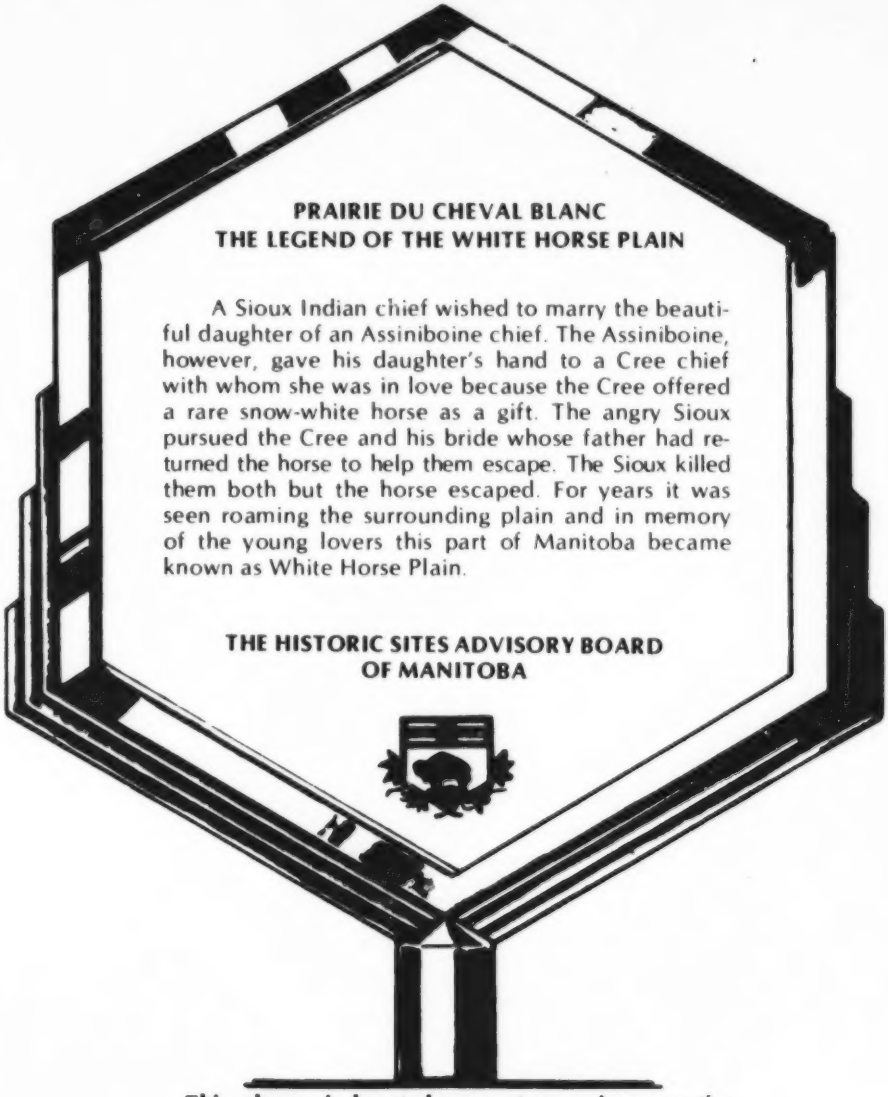
The legend of White Horse Plain is found in many books and articles. Two of the more detailed versions are in *Canadian Readers: Book V* (Toronto: W.J. Gage & Company, 1924) and *Cuthbert Grant of Grantown* by Margaret Arnett MacLeod and W.L. Morton (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1963). This second book is also a good source on the development of Grantown, the first settlement on White Horse Plain.

The book by Diamond Jenness, *Indians of Canada*, Third Edition (Ottawa: National Museum of Canada, 1955) provides information on the plains tribes, as well as some comments on native folklore.

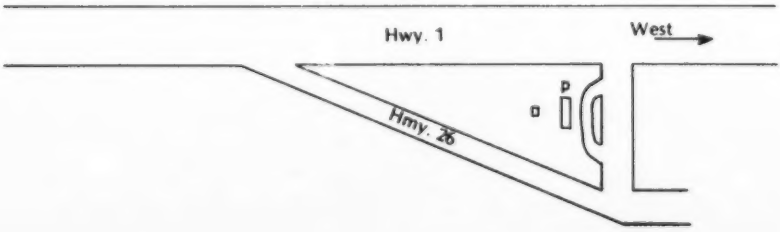
Credit

The cover photograph of the White Horse Statue is printed courtesy of the Manitoba Archives.

Special thanks to Cathy Pettipas, Curator of Native Ethnology at the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature for her assistance in the preparation of this pamphlet.


PRAIRIE DU CHEVAL BLANC
THE LEGEND OF THE WHITE HORSE PLAIN
A Sioux Indian chief wished to marry the beautiful daughter of an Assiniboine chief. The Assiniboine, however, gave his daughter's hand to a Cree chief with whom she was in love because the Cree offered a rare snow-white horse as a gift. The angry Sioux pursued the Cree and his bride whose father had returned the horse to help them escape. The Sioux killed them both but the horse escaped. For years it was seen roaming the surrounding plain and in memory of the young lovers this part of Manitoba became known as White Horse Plain.
THE HISTORIC SITES ADVISORY BOARD
OF MANITOBA

This plaque is located on a stone cairn near the junction of Highways 1 and 26.



OUR HERITAGE

We have received great gifts as our heritage in Canada — beautiful rivers and parks, rolling hills, trees and grassland; the rich resources of nature are ours to protect, cherish and enjoy.

Wherever man has been, there are marks of defilement and destruction — let us resolve that this shall not be our legacy to the twenty-first century. Let us rather honour and emulate those who went before us as pioneers, who gave of themselves, building and creating, enriching the land. They have earned our thanks, and while we cannot repay them, we can respect their achievements and resolve that we will try to follow them in action and in attitude.

For this we set aside this special place in our Province, a site that is part of history.

POOR

QUALITY

ORIGINAL